

VZCZCXRO1422
PP RUEHAG RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR
DE RUEHCV #0850/01 1881637
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 071637Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3333
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000850

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/02/2029
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: LEDEZMA TRIES TO WIN OAS ATTENTION WITH A HUNGER
STRIKE

REF: CARACAS 00724

CARACAS 00000850 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

1. (C) Summary: Mayor of Greater Caracas Antonio Ledezma entered the offices of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Caracas July 3 and began a hunger strike to demand an OAS response to President Chavez's transgressions against the opposition in Venezuela. Ledezma has argued that the OAS owes as much attention to Venezuela as it has given to Honduras, including sending a delegation to observe the current situation in Caracas. This move comes on the heels of his well-publicized visits to Washington and New York City. The rest of the opposition has begun to more actively support Ledezma's cause, and on July 7 representatives of the opposition visited all OAS member embassies in Caracas to deliver letters requesting the OAS to investigate actions in Venezuela. A group of former Ambassadors and academics delivered similar letters July 6 to the same Embassies. The rest of civil society remains lukewarm in their support, however. With most remaining elected opposition officials focusing on governance over confrontation with the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) (septel), Ledezma's latest maneuver may represent a desperate gesture to avoid political irrelevance. End Summary.

STARVING FOR ATTENTION

2. (SBU) Caracas mayor Antonio Ledezma began a highly-publicized hunger strike July 3 in the Caracas office of the OAS Mission in the affluent Las Mercedes neighborhood of Caracas to demand a response from Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza regarding GBRV aggressions against opposition officials. (Note: Although popularly elected in November 2008, his office was stripped of resources and authority with the passage of the District Capital Law, which created a parallel Vice President of Caracas appointed directly by Chavez. End Note.) In a letter to Insulza dated July 3, Ledezma decries the "neo-dictatorial" behavior of the Chavez administration which he says has committed multiple violations of democratic principles to strangle the governorships of Tachira, Zulia, Miranda, Nueva Esparta, Carabobo, and "the most important mayorships in the country." He contends that this behavior requires the same level of attention that the OAS has granted to Honduras, including sending a delegation to Venezuela to evaluate the situation.

3 (SBU) Initially, 12 other workers from the mayor's

office joined the strike, although at least two left by July 7 due to medical complications. The other strikers and the media have been largely limited to an outer area of the building. Press photos of Ledezma 72-hours into the strike show him looking physically alert, propped up on pillows and a blanket and holding a copy of the Venezuelan constitution. In an interview with pro-opposition Globovision TV July 6, Ledezma's wife Miti pledged that "this is not about Antonio, this is about the people." She cautioned that her husband suffers from kidney and lung problems -- the latter caused allegedly by being tear gassed during a past protest -- and that he was going against doctor's orders by carrying out the strike. A Globovision representative told PAS officials July 6 that Ledezma's health is "in a bad condition."

GROWING LOCAL SUPPORT??

¶4. (C) Former Venezuelan diplomat Sadio Garavini di Turno delivered a letter to Polcouns July 6 in support of Ledezma, noting the OAS's "uncommonly quick and laudable" response to the situation in Tegucigalpa and in defense of Honduran democracy. The letter, signed by a number of mid-level opposition party officials and former diplomats, argues that the "numerous irregular acts committed by the state against mayors and governors" in Venezuela warrants an equivalent level of attention from the OAS. An attached copy of an official gazette issued by the Caracas metropolitan council asserts its support for the "democratic institutionalism" of Ledezma's office and demands the immediate return of the mayor's budget; the end of the "arbitrary dismantlement" of his office; and that the OAS should designate and send a commission to Venezuela to observe the situation. On July 7, PODEMOS National Deputy Juan Jose Molina, accompanied by two

CARACAS 00000850 002.2 OF 002

other PODEMOS members delivered a similar letter to POLCOUNS claiming to be representing the opposition roundtable (reftel). Per Molina, the opposition parties divided up all OAS member embassies and delivered the same letter the morning of July 7.

¶5. (SBU) Workers from Ledezma's office July 6 called on the National Electoral Council (CNE) to convoke a referendum in greater Caracas to ask residents who they want to govern the city. Spokesman Miguel Angel Nieto contrasted Ledezma's election in November 2008 which he won with 800,000 votes to Caracas Viceroy Jacqueline Farias, "elected by just one vote." Mayors Gerardo Blyde (Baruta), Emilio Grateron (Chacao), Carlos Ocaritz (Sucre), and Myriam Donascimento (El Hatillo) temporarily joined the protest July 5 to show their support of Ledezma. Evelyn Trejo de Rosales, the wife of self-exiled former mayor of Maracaibo Manuel Rosales, noted that her husband had also been the subject of GBRV aggressions and pledged her support for Ledezma.

CHAVISTAS FIGHT BACK

¶6. (SBU) Ledezma's Secretary of Finance, Hector Urgulles, complained July 6 that the Caracas municipality had not received 190 million BsF (about USD 88 million at the official exchange rate) from the central government owed since May that is needed to pay workers' salaries. Two United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) National Assembly Deputies, Juan Carlos Dugarte and Alexander Nebreda, refuted the claim and publicly accused Ledezma July 6 of corruption, pledging to take the accusations to the Attorney General. Dugarte alleged that Ledezma had diverted funds for his own use, resulting in his office's inability to pay employees' salaries. Nebreda called the hunger strike a "parapet" and said "I told Ledezma to watch his cholesterol and triglycerides because at night he sends his bodyguards out to buy chicken and salad."

17. (C) Comment: In taking such a dramatic stand, Ledezma may be showing signs of desperation over his increasing irrelevance. After failing to generate enough public outcry at home to pressure the GBRV, now he is trying to internationalize his plight -- first by heading to the United States, and now by appealing to the OAS. His efforts seem to be gaining support among the opposition parties, but more widespread popular support for his plight is still lacking.
End Comment.
DUDDY